

HUMANITIES

Work by God or By God We'll Have Work

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ABSTRACT

America has been founded on the principles of hard work and industry. From its early beginnings with indentured servitude and chattel slavery to its more republican and free-labor ideologies. Through the literature one may trace this theme of labor from the early stages of the Spanish conquest of Central and South America, to one of the bloodiest conflicts that ultimately abolished chattel slavery and ushered in the free-labor system that we are currently under today.

Keywords: chattel slavery, indentured servitude, work, free-labor, capitalism, Antebellum

The dichotomy between free-labor and chattel slavery has always been a part of America's existence. From the earliest discoveries of the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico to the mainland colonies of Virginia and the Massachusetts Bay, people have slaved, labored and toiled this land to render it useful and industrious in the name of their God, their religion or their principles. The reasons to which Americans would till the land would drastically change, moving from a slave-based labor system—inspired by their God—in the eras of Bartolome de las Casas, John Smith, William Bradford, Benjamin Franklin and Olaudah Equiano to the more republican free-labor based system of the American Antebellum period with writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Brown and Fredrick Douglass. The question of free-labor and chattel slavery would play out for nearly three centuries in the American past, and on each side of the question proponents would use their God and their religion to justify their morals and actions.

On the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, the Spanish quickly subjugated the native population into chattel slavery by forcing them to dive for pearls. De Las Casas claimed that immediately after the Spanish landed, they had begun to depopulate the islands through their cruel treatment of the natives. Instead of performing the extraneous task themselves the Spanish used their might and religious tactics to subjugate the native population. They stole their food stocks, wives, children and forced them into enhanced labor roles. "Then," De Las Casas wrote, "like sheep, they are sorted out into flocks of ten or twenty persons, separating fathers from sons, wives from husbands, and the Spaniards draw lots, the ship owners carrying off their share, the best flock, to compensate them for moneys they have invested in their fleet of two or three ships."¹ The Spanish designed a system that exploited the abilities of the natives to dive to great depths and hold their breaths for long periods of time. The *Repartimiento* was supposed to convert the natives to Christianity, however, it ceased to be anything more than a slave-holding system.² The Spaniards dehumanized the natives and denied them of basic rights, forcing them to dive for hours and days without food or basic nourishment. "And in this extraordinary labor," claimed De Las Casas, "or, better put, infernal labor the Lucayan Indians are finally consumed as are captive Indians from other provinces."³

On the mainland of America labor took a different course. John Smith, the President of the Virginia Company, promised the sons of England upward mobility and social change if they would venture to come to America. "Now that carpenter, mason, gardener, tailor, smith, sailor, forger, or what other, may they not make this a pretty recreation though they fish but an hour in a day, to take more than they eat in a week."⁴ He desperately needed people to labor in his new found colony. "They are building a strong fort, they hope shortly to finish, in the interim they are well provided: their number is about a hundred persons, all in health, and well near sixty acres of ground well planted with corn, besides their gardens presented with useful fruits."⁵ Smith then goes on to plead for more supplies, lest all his hard work in the Virginia colony go to waste.

Almost six hundred miles to the north of John Smith and the Virginia colony, William Brad-

1. The Norton Anthology of American Literature 7th Edition, (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2007) 39.

2. Ibid. 39.

3. Ibid. 39.

4. Ibid. 68.

5. Ibid. 71.

ford, in the Massachusetts Bay colony faced a similar labor problem. As more and more English poured into the colony, the production of corn and cattle soared and spread the boundaries too thin. “Also,” Bradford wrote, “the people of the plantation began to grow outward estates, by reason of the flowing of many people in to the Bay of Massachusetts by which means corn and cattle rose to a great price, by which many were much enriched, and commodities grew plentiful.”⁶ However, the spread of outward estates created the colony’s first religious and labor crises. As the boundaries spread further and further people began to demand more say in their religious institutions. Colonist wound up breaking off from the Plymouth colony and forming their own church at Duxbury. Vast tracts of land were given to loyalists that stayed on the Plymouth plantation and indentured servants were then put to work. One such indentured servant—who was subsequently executed for acts of buggery—was Thomas Granger. Not to make excuses for Granger’s lewd acts, but, the life of an indentured servant was atrocious. They often fared no better than an African or Native slave.

So atrocious were the conditions of servitude that Benjamin Franklin, one of our founding fathers, ran away from his indenture to his brother. “At length a fresh Difference arising between my brother and me, I took upon me to assert my Freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce the new Indentures.”⁷ He claimed that his brother treated him no differently than any other indenture and acted tyrannical. “But my brother was passionate and had often beaten me, which I took extremely amiss; and thinking my apprentice very tedious, I was continually wishing for some opportunity of shortening it.”⁸ He was under contract with his brother for a total of nine years of which he only served four.

As Franklin came of age the ideology of capitalism began to take root in the colonies. Capitalists preached some of the same doctrines that the Christians preached, mainly hard work, industry, and capitalizing on land, time and commodities. For example, Benjamin Franklin told the people of Europe they should not come to America expecting a life of ease. “There are few great proprietors of the soil, and few tenants; most people cultivate their own lands, upon their rents or incomes, or to pay the high prices given in Europe for paintings, statues, architecture, and other works of art that are more curious than useful.”⁹ Franklin thought that the arts were more suited for Europe, and that America was for the industrious and hardworking. “The husbandman is in honor there [America], and even the mechanic, because their employments are useful. The people have a saying, that God Almighty is himself a mechanic, the greatest in the universe.”¹⁰ Franklin, had continued the tradition carried out during the Enlightenment of creating the “God Mechanic” that more properly fit the image of their era.

The capitalistic values that shaped Franklin’s world in the American colonies began to creep onto the sugar and cotton plantations in the Caribbean and the American South. The usage of chattel slavery became a vital part of the American mercantile economy. Olaudah Equiano gave his narrative of the life of an African slave. He claimed that his master was not a typical slave

6. Ibid. 129.

7. Ibid. 485.

8. Ibid. 484.

9. Ibid. 463.

10. Ibid. 464.

owner, in that he had never beat his slaves; rather, he: “possessed a most amiable disposition and temper and was very charitable and humane. If any of his slaves behaved amiss, he did not beat them or use them ill, but parted with them.”¹¹ Equiano’s master was not a cruel at all. He allowed his slaves a certain amount of freedom in which they would in return repay him with their loyalty, hard work and dedication. “I can quote many instances of gentleman,” Equiano wrote, “who on their estates in the West Indies, and the scene is quite changed; the Negroes are treated with lenity and proper care, by which their lives are prolonged, and their masters profited.”¹² Equiano pleaded with slave owners for the fair treatment of slaves. He felt that if slaves were properly cared for, they would live longer lives, be more productive, and it would reduce the number of slaves needed throughout the colonies. Within a half of century, the pleas for fairer treatment of slaves would spill over to an all-out resistance to a government that would support such uncivil policies.

Henry David Thoreau challenged the authority of a government that would enslave a population and give them no return for their labor. In his essay titled “Resistance to Civil Government” Thoreau stated: “This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity?”¹³ In Thoreau’s eyes America was developed to permeate republican and capitalistic ideals; however, he knew that intentions did not always match conventions. Thoreau felt that as America enslaved almost a fourth of its nation it diminished its full potential when it swayed from the principles it was founded upon: Christianity, capitalism and republicanism. “How does it become of a man,” Thoreau asked, “to behave toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.”¹⁴ Many Americans answered Thoreau’s call, some did so violently.

In his plea for John Brown, Thoreau deified Brown as if he had been anointed by God to carry out the antislavery rebellion. He wrote: “They talk as if it were impossible that a man could be divinely appointed in these days to do any work whatever; as if vows and religion were out of date as connected with any man’s daily work.”¹⁵ Thoreau felt that as long as there were injustices, such as slavery, that many Americans would be divinely inspired by their principles to work towards eliminating those injustices. He claimed that if one did not die for standing up for their principles, like Brown did, that they in fact did not live at all. No man, Thoreau said, “had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived.”¹⁶ For Thoreau, John Brown was held up as a Jesus-like figure for his defense of Christianity, the free-labor system, republican values.

Thoreau had an ability to inspire others by placing himself in the shoes of others. “I speak for the slave when I say,” Thoreau wrote, “that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that

11. Ibid. 694.

12. Ibid. 696.

13. Nina Bayam. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2007). 1857.

14. Ibid. 1859.

15. Ibid. 2058.

16. Ibid. 2058.

philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me.”¹⁷ Many of Thoreau’s contemporaries, including Fredrick Douglass, felt that Brown and his men were on a suicide mission. However, John Brown was a religious fanatic, and he and his fellow abolitionist drafted a provisional constitution in hopes of ending slavery. Robert L. Tsai wrote, in an essay titled “John Brown’s Constitution,” that Brown’s drafting of the constitution, his analogue of the Declaration of Independence and his antics during his trial should all dismiss the claims that Brown was on a suicide mission. Tsai argued that Brown was a statesman that saw no other option but the use of violence to solve the slavery versus free-labor problem.¹⁸

John Brown and his fellow abolitionists drafted their constitution at the Chatham Convention in Chatham, Canada. They then took it, along with a provisional army, down to Virginia and raided the federal fort at Harper’s Ferry. Their hopes were to destroy the American government and install a new government more friendly to the principles of God and free-labor. Nicole Etcheson, in her essay “John Brown Terrorist?” claimed that historians often label Brown as a terrorist on a suicide mission, and they refuse to see the real aims of him and his men. Brown created a new state, backed by a provincial government and a provincial army. Etcheson also claimed that although Fredrick Douglass, one of John Brown’s good friends, refused to participate in the raid on Harper’s Ferry, he did champion it for “the fear it instilled in slaveholders.”¹⁹ Douglass, again like Brown, saw no other option than the use of violence in order to free the slaves from the horrors of the chattel system.

Fredrick Douglass also saw the raid on Harper’s Ferry as a suicide mission and refused to participate in it. It is surprising, though, that Douglass felt that the US constitution was an anti-slavery document, considering that he supported John Brown in the drafting of a new one. Douglass broke with his longtime friend and fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison over their interpretations of the U.S. Constitution, and after the Dred Scot decision Douglass became more militant in his approach to abolitionism. He felt that African Americans must be their “own representatives and advocates, not exclusively, but peculiarly—not distinct from, but in connection with our white friends.”²⁰ Although Douglass did not participate in Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, he was one of the great recruiters of and advocates of African-American soldiers in the Union Army during the Civil War.

From the literature of the Americas one can trace the institution of slavery back to its founding and hear the voices of its discontent, from writers like Bartolome de las Casas we find the horrors of Native subjugation with the case of the pearl divers. On the mainland, the early colonies were shaped by hard-working religious zealots who only turned towards a watered-down system of slavery—indentured servitude—after a split in the church at Duxbury left so many acres of land to be worked by so few colonist. In the American South the principles of free-labor capitalism crashed head-on with the ideas of chattel slavery. Writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Brown and Fredrick Douglass used ethical appeal and religious ideology to address the problems of slavery. Ultimately, the question of free-labor versus chattel slavery would be settled in one of

17. Ibid. 2057.

18. Robert L. Tsai, “John Brown’s Constitution, *Boston College Law Review* 51, no. 1 (January 2010): 153.

19. Nicole Etcheson, “John Brown, Terrorist?” *American Nineteenth Century History* 10 (1): 37.

20. Nina Bayam. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2062.

the bloodiest conflicts in American history on the battlefields of the American Civil War. When it was all said and done, there was work to do by God.

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